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The
Interpretation
of the
Apocalypse

By
Francis Huston Wallace

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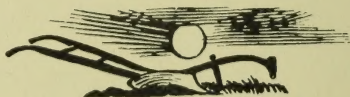
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THE
INTERPRETATION
OF THE
APOCALYPSE.

A PAPER

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THE APOCALYPSE

HERE is, I venture to say, a very common indifference to this book, if not a prejudice against it, among our more thoughtful people—due partly to the fanatical literalism of many interpreters of it, but also partly to its peculiar form, so unfamiliar, unattractive, and, in parts, grotesque to us and our taste. A person of far more than average ability and culture said to me with reference to the Book of Revelation in an awe-struck whisper, “Isn’t it a case of softening of the brain?” We can hardly wonder at this feeling in one trained in the school of the best literature of Greece and Rome, of France and England, literature characterized by felicity of phrase, concinnity of thought, and polish of style.

However, in the Apocalypse every one must grant, at least here and there, sublime and inspiring passages. But oh! comes the objection, oh! the dreary tracts of the barren wilderness of seals and trumpets and bowls, of dragon and beasts and frogs, of horsemen and locusts and earthquakes through which one must wearily trudge to reach the oases of interest and inspiration!

But what if there be some method in this madness, after all? What if there be well beaten paths which we may tread? What if *other such books* exist, the knowledge of which may help us in the study of this? What if we find that in this book, as in all similar literature, the real value

lies not in the elaborate and largely imaginative details, but in the great, strong, quickening general thoughts and the impression and influence which they create as a whole?

We must judge all literary forms by the literary habits and tastes of the age and people to which they belong. And there was a class of religious literature widely current and highly prized both in the later Jewish and in the early Christian ages to which this book belongs, however superior to all other books of the class, and in relation to which it must be judged and interpreted.

Apocalyptic literature is the form which prophecy assumed in later and troublous times, in times of foreign oppression and persecution. The transition is seen within the Old Testament, where we pass from prophecy, closing with Malachi, to apocalypse in the Book of Daniel, at the time of the oppression of Syria and the heroic struggle of the Maccabees. This special form of literature arose in the midst of foreign oppression, when it was imperatively necessary, by all available methods, to confirm the people in the faith of ethical monotheism, to encourage them in patient endurance under persecution, and to fan the expiring flame of their hope in the coming of the Messiah and the triumph of the kingdom of God. The author of the Book of Daniel was granted visions from God which inspired his own hope and which he then freely and plastically elaborated for the benefit of his people. In all this literature, both within the Bible and without it, brilliant pictures are painted with much of the luxuriance of Oriental imagination—pictures of the deliverance, power, wealth, felicity to be shortly ushered in for the faithful people of God at the advent of the Messiah. One prom-

inent feature of these works is the relation of the kingdom of God not only with worldly monarchs and forces, but with the kingdom of Satan, the conflict of the kingdom of God with that of Satan, and the final overthrow of the one and the perfect consummation of the other.

Most of these apocalypses are *pseudonymous*, that is to say, they are put by their unknown authors into the mouths of ancient patriarchs and prophets whose style and thought are, as far as possible, adopted, as Daniel and Enoch, Baruch and Ezra. This usage may be due partly to the literary instinct to secure a hearing through the use of some familiar and revered name, and partly to the danger of open authorship in times of oppression and persecution. This latter consideration largely explains the very *symbolic*, constrained, artificial style, so much inferior to the noble originality and majestic boldness of the earlier prophets. In times of persecution, the authors were not free to speak out boldly, it was not safe to address or even to allude clearly and unmistakably to the persons and events of the time, and therefore mysterious symbols were employed which concealed, as well as revealed, so that they were enigmatical to outsiders and understood only by the initiated.

This literature abounds, then, in visions, dreams, pictures, symbols—scene after scene unrolling before you, depicting one phase and another in the mighty conflict between right and wrong, God and Satan, with little regard to unity or consistency of representation, and still less to chronological sequence of events.

The writers of these apocalypses, moreover, were accustomed to use previous history and prophecy freely, and

weave into their own compositions the ideas, the symbols, even the very words of their sources. This literary habit adds to the confused impression which this literature produces upon the modern mind, though it probably added to the power of these books with readers familiar with certain traditional symbolical representations of the enemies of the theocracy and of the triumphs of the kingdom.

Such, in brief, are the literary methods of the apocalyptic literature, of the Book of Daniel, of the Book of Enoch (quoted in Jude), of 4th Esdras, of the Book of Jubilees, of the Book of Baruch, of the Sibylline Oracles, and of many other works, Jewish and Christian.

There seems no reason why the Holy Spirit should not adopt for His spiritual ends, why holy Scripture should not contain specimens of this method of revelation, this type of literature. The Old Testament has the Book of Daniel. The New Testament has the Apocalypse of John, the noblest of all apocalypses, which, indeed, has rightly given its name to the whole class.

It was natural that the Christian Church should, in the dark, distressing days of Nero and Domitian, seek support for its faith not only in the past but also in the future, should ask not only what God had done but also what He was about to do, should be concerned not only with the founding but also with the consummation of the kingdom, should develop therefore not only history but also prophecy. And in times of persecution and danger it was natural that the prophecy should follow familiar precedent and assume the apocalyptic form of symbol and enigma, gorgeous, imaginative pictures of conflict and triumph, of

endurance and reward, turning our thought from the scenes of turmoil and tribulation, oppression and outrage on earth to the glorious scene in heaven where the great multitude cry, "Hallelujah; salvation, and glory, and power belong to our God . . . Hallelujah; for the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigneth" (xix. 1, 6).

Now how shall such literature be interpreted? We are on our way to a right method of interpretation when we have recognized the relation of this book and of all such books to definite times and concrete circumstances. Every one of the apocalypses springs out of a historical situation, refers specially to the then present conditions and the future expected to immediately follow, partly creates its own forms of representation and partly takes them over from the Old Testament or earlier apocalypses, and in general gives the loose reign to the imagination, within the sphere of the essential principles and hopes of true religion. Why should it be otherwise with the Apocalypse of John?

Let us consider, in the light of the facts of apocalyptic literature in general and of this book in particular, several methods of interpretation—the Futurist, the Præterist, and the Ideal.

What may be called the *Futurist View* is to the effect that all, or at least most of the predictions of the book are still waiting fulfilment. Under this head may be placed the view that the book contains the prophetic history of the Church and world through the long course of the Christian ages from the time of Christ to the end of all. Then much has been already fulfilled, but more remains to be fulfilled.

On this view, in any of its forms, the prophecy of this

book would be *sui generis* in the Bible in two respects, (1) as giving a detailed account of a long series of far distant events, and (2) as without sufficient relation to its own times. How much satisfaction or encouragement would it be to suffering Christians of the age of Nero to be told in advance of the development of the papal power, of the rise and progress of Mohammedanism, or of the career of Napoleon III. of France? Against any such method of interpretation must be put as thoroughly decisive the passages which indicate the purpose to reveal *the immediate future*, in which the speedy coming of Christ is central.

“Write therefore the things which thou sawest, and the things which are, and the things which shall come to pass hereafter” (i. 19).

The last phrase implies an immediate and not a long distant future.

“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show unto his servants, even the things which must shortly come to pass” (i. 1).

“Blessed is he that readeth and they that hear the words of the prophecy, and keep the things which are written therein : for the time is at hand ” (i. 3).

“And he saith unto me, Seal not up the words of the prophecy of this book ; for the time is at hand ” (xxii. 10).

“ . . . And behold I come quickly . . . Behold I come quickly . . . He who testifieth these things saith, Yea : I come quickly. Amen : come, Lord Jesus ” (xxii. 7, 12, 20).

This book evidently shares the general New Testament expectation of the speedy second coming of the Lord and the consummation of all things at His coming.

Our modern premillennialists are right in their contention that in the thought and hope of the early Church no long period of a thousand years was to intervene before the coming of the Lord.

Paul (in 1 Thess. iv. 17) hopes to be of the number who are alive at the descent of the Lord from heaven to be "caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air."

James bids his brethren be "patient . . . until the coming of the Lord . . . for the coming of the Lord is at hand" (iv. 7-9).

The *Præterist Interpretation* now claims that this primitive Christian expectation of the speedy coming of the Lord has been fulfilled, that the prophecies of the Apocalypse have already been accomplished, that the woes have been poured out, that Babylon has been destroyed, that the Lord has come.

The conception is that all was fulfilled either in the destruction of Jerusalem, when, in a sense, old things passed away and all things became new, or in the fall of Rome, when ancient history had its close.

But in the Apocalypse, as in the rest of the New Testament, the *personal* coming of Christ forms the very heart and soul of the hopes of the Church. Now neither in the destruction of Jerusalem, nor in the fall of Rome did Christ come *in person* for the resurrection of the dead, the judgment of the world, the consummation of the kingdom. The representatives of this view always grow weak in their interpretation as they approach the final chapters, with their pictures of the general resurrection, the new heaven and new earth, the new Jerusalem, and the heavenly scenes of rest and joy and triumph, illuminated with the Saviour's "behold I come quickly!"

Consider such passages as these :—

“Howbeit, that what ye have, hold fast till I come. And he that overcometh, and he that keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give authority over the nations” (ii. 25).

Has Christ thus come? The *end* is not yet, and He comes at the end.

“Behold, he cometh with the clouds; and every eye shall see him and they which pierced him; and all the tribes of the earth shall mourn over him. Even so, Amen” (i. 7).

Has Christ yet come upon the clouds to the general judgment?

“I saw a great white throne, and him that sat upon it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne; and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged out of the things which were written in the books, according to their works” (xx. 11-12).

Have the dead yet been raised and the books opened?

Consider the vision of xxi. 1-4: The new heaven and the new earth, the first heaven and the first earth having passed away, and the sea. . . . The new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God . . . God dwelling among men as their God: “And he shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and death shall be no more; neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain, any more: the first things are passed away.”

Has this sublime picture yet been realized?

No ! Christ has not yet so come as he departed (Acts i. 11), not yet so come as the early Church expected Him to come quickly.

Now our modern premillennialists and adventists of all schools naively bid us ignore the teaching of history and blindly follow in the footsteps of those who thus expected Christ to come so soon. They would have us daily, eagerly, impatiently watching for the blessed appearing of our God and Saviour.

But if the early Church was disappointed in this eager hope, in this impatient fixing of the times and seasons, may we not be so, too ?

Is it not wiser to recognize the limitations of our knowledge, even of New Testament insight and foresight ? .

There is one great passage which should teach all men, everywhere and evermore great caution on this subject. Jesus Himself warns us (in Mark xiii. 32) : " But of that day or that hour knoweth no one, not even the angels in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father."

Yet we find the disciples, after the resurrection, still trying to determine times and seasons and once more rebuked by our Lord.

We need hardly wonder that some confusion should have crept into the New Testament representations on this subject. Hope tends to foreshorten distances. Men seized of the great inspiring principles of the Christian faith and the Christian hope may have, in this respect, run before they were sent, may have been too quick to see those principles come to their issue, and may have misunderstood their Lord's own teaching in regard to the progress and consummation of His kingdom and His own

return. They were filled with Old Testament and current apocalyptic ideas of the kingdom, which recognized no advent but one, no interval between the setting up of the kingdom and its consummation. When the logic of events taught them such an interval and compelled them to look forward to a second advent, they would be inclined to foreshorten the perspective and hasten the eagerly-longed for end.

Jesus may have spoken of His coming again in more senses than one, *e.g.*, at Pentecost (as in John xiv. 18-19), at the destruction of Jerusalem (Matt. xxiv.), and finally at the end of the ages, for the winding up of earthly history and the inauguration of the perfect heavenly kingdom (Matt. xxiii. 39-41, xxvi. 64).

The disciples, in their eagerness for the triumph of their cause and the return of their Lord, may have confused and intermingled these predictions and transferred to the final coming utterances of Jesus which properly refer to a nearer and subordinate advent.

But, whether this explanation of the fact be tenable or not, the fact remains that the Apocalypse and the whole New Testament as it stands seem all aglow with eager expectation of the speedy return of the ascended Lord—

“ The Lord who comes in mercy,
The Lord who comes in might,
To terminate the evil,
To diadem the right.”

If neither the Futurist nor yet the Præterist interpretation seems to be the key to open the door of this mysterious book, what of the *Ideal interpretation*? This system sees in the Apocalypse simply the statement in striking and

graphic forms of great general principles of the divine government and grace, with no emphasis on the details, and with no attempt to apply the details to concrete historical persons or events either of the then present or of the future. It is quite true that in all apocalyptic literature there is a large ideal element, much that is not intended to be understood literally or even applied symbolically to concrete persons or events, much that is due either to conventional and traditional symbolism or to free creative imagination. It is true that the Apocalypse does reveal the great principles of the divine government which run through the development of the Church and the world. It is true that in the study of this book it is more profitable to lay hold of the great principles at work than to worry over the interpretation of imaginative details which are but the comparatively unimportant form into which John's divinely inspired philosophy of history is cast. It is true that we have got the best out of this book if we carry away from its perusal the inspiring impression that, in the age-long conflict of good and evil, God is with the good, that right shall not be forever on the scaffold nor wrong forever on the throne, that Christ and His kingdom shall finally and for ever triumph.

Nevertheless, *the ideal view is inadequate*. It lacks appreciation of the phenomena and spirit of apocalyptic literature, which is always interested in a concrete historical situation and in an expected historical development. This book is not a revelation merely of certain great general principles, but also of an expected course of history springing out of the then historical conditions and addressed to the purpose of comforting by that

expectation the Christian people in the midst of that actual historical situation. Throughout, indeed, general principles are revealed which may be applied to many another historical situation to comfort and encourage many other people in many other ages. But we must first ascertain the original historical circumstance and the original significance of the representations. Wherever the concrete emerges, we must interpret it primarily in relation to John's own times and readers. This is readily recognized in regard to the epistles to the seven churches. They manifestly deal with concrete circumstances and conditions. The seven hills on which the woman sits (xvii. 9) evidently are the hills of Rome, and the description of Babylon (in chapters xvii. and xviii.) makes the identification with Rome indubitable. The ideal view is justifiable to this extent that we should not seek for historical persons and events in the apocalyptic scenes and events except where clearly indicated. One great part of the duty of an interpreter of such literature is to carefully discriminate between the ideal and the historical elements.

The true interpretation may therefore be called *the Ideal-historical*. It recognizes a large ideal element, it does not profess to interpret all the details predictively, it regards many details as merely poetical drapery, and, where it is constrained by the clear evidence of the passages to see specific references to historical characters and events, it interprets them as pertaining to the historical situation as it existed in the time of John or to that immediate future in which John expects the coming of the Lord and the triumph of the kingdom.

This interpretation is *ideal*, then, inasmuch as it regards

much of the prophecy of the book as not referring to or exactly fulfilled in any definite historical events, but as containing picturesque representations of general principles, or as consisting of imaginative and poetic drapery. Its pictures, as a recent writer has put it, "represent realities but not literalities." (Cobern, on Daniel.)

Nevertheless, this interpretation is not merely ideal. It is at the same time *historical*, inasmuch as it recognizes the fact that John is not merely stating general principles, but also considering the phenomena of his own time in the light of their relation to the kingdom of God and of his expectation of certain courses of development out of the historical conditions in the midst of which he stands.

It is evident from all that has been said that no apocalyptic book can be understood apart from its *historical situation*. We must fix the historical situation, therefore, of the apocalypse of John, and then see how John applies the great Christian principles and hopes in order to establish Christian faith and courage in the midst of the distress of that situation.

Now the date, according to all the evidence of Christian antiquity, as well as of the book itself, is either soon after the persecution under Nero (say A.D. 68), or toward the close of the reign of Domitian (*i.e.*, about A.D. 95). The time is one in which Rome is drunk with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.

On the whole, I incline to the earlier, or Neronic date, and shall use it as my working hypothesis.

Under the storm and stress of cruel persecution, John receives from God visions of the conflict of the Church and the world, of the triumph of the Church

through the help of God and the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, and of the felicity of the faithful in the perfected and heavenly kingdom. These visions are the basis of the book. John elaborates them freely, painting some frightful and some sublime pictures of scenes and events in heaven and on earth fitted to encourage Christians to fight the good fight, to overcome the world, to lay hold of eternal life. His oriental imagination works freely in material furnished partly by his own visions, partly by the Old Testament, which he quotes most abundantly and effectively, and, perhaps, partly by earlier apocalypses and traditional apocalyptic symbols. But he produces a book whose unity as it stands can not well be doubted and which is instinct with Christian truth.

The Old Testament coloring of the book is remarkable. More than five hundred references to the Old Testament are marked in the Westcott and Hort edition. Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel are drawn on with special frequency. The fortunes of the New Testament Church are perpetually described in Old Testament language and with reference to the history of Israel. Failure to distinguish between a real and an ideal identification of Israel and the Christian Church has led to many gross and literal interpretations. The recognition of this distinction between real and ideal will illuminate many passages.

When the 144,000 are sealed (vii. 2-8), twelve thousand from each tribe of Israel, the representation is evidently conventional, and probably indicates the ideal continuity of the Christian Church with the Old Testament Church of the twelve tribes. The Christian Church is described in terms of the old community of Israel. The representation

can hardly refer merely to believing Jews. Why should only believing Jews be represented as sealed and only Gentile Christians as triumphing (vs. 9, 10)?

When Christ marches forth (xiv. 1-3) in the midst of the 144,000, the truth conveyed is surely His presence as victorious leader in the midst of the Christian Church described as the ideal Israel. He stands upon Mount Zion, not literally, but in this sense that He stands in the midst of the Church, for Mount Zion was the central point of the Old Testament Church; and the whole representation simply means the same as Matthew xxviii. 18-20: "All authority hath been given unto me in heaven and on earth. Go ye therefore . . . and lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world."

Babylon, the great and dreaded enemy of the Old Testament Church, becoming typically the enemy of the Christian Church, *i.e.*, it represents the Roman Empire. Babylon had been to the ancient Church just what Rome was now to the Church of John's time, the powerful and wicked and persecuting enemy of God and the Church. Therefore the attributes and fortunes of Babylon are transferred here to Rome, and, in the glowing pictures of this book,

" Zion in her anguish
With Babylon doth cope."

The enemies of the Church are represented as crossing the river Euphrates (xvi. 12.), because so often the enemies of Israel had crossed that great river. The hostile forces are represented as collected at Armageddon, because that place was famous for the great victory of Deborah and Barak over the Canaanites.

The great battle outside of Jerusalem, "when the winepress of the wrath of God was trodden without the city, and there came out blood from the winepress, even unto the bridles of the horses, as far as a thousand and six hundred furlongs" (xiv. 20), is but a description, glowing with the vivid colors of Old Testament history, of the destruction of all forces hostile to Christ and the Church, and the Jerusalem outside of which it occurs is not to be regarded (as adventists regard it) as really, but only as poetically or typically the centre of the Christian Church. To interpret literally, is to lose the great thought in puerile detail and to drag the fortunes of the Christian Church at the heels of that Judaism which Christianity has fulfilled and superseded.

The heavenly Jerusalem is, in form, as Jewish as language can make it. But do we not all look through the form to the essential reality and see the wide and glorious conception, not of a Jewish city, but of a state of supreme felicity for all believers in the heavenly world? No writer has yet devised any forms of expression for the indefinable realities of the heavenly state so powerful and so helpful as these old, familiar, poetical descriptions created by the inspired genius of John. To understand them literally is absurd. To allow one's spirit to be stirred with their sublimity and melted with their beauty, and so to have one's faith quickened, one's hope brightened, one's courage intensified, is the part of true wisdom. The poetic element must be fully recognized in order to sane and salutary interpretation. Literalism makes the book nothing better than a delirious dream.

A prophet is a poet, differing from other poets mainly in the divinely given contents of his poetry, in his inspired

philosophy of history, in his marvellous foresight into the course of events, and in his sublime confidence in the victory of righteousness and God ; but he is like other poets as to his methods and forms of representation. Poetry is creative. The imagination creates scenes and incidents as the vehicle for spiritual truth with no intention that they should be taken seriously and literally in all their minutiae. Dante describes a vision and what he saw in it, and then says :

“ Soon as my soul had outwardly returned
To things external to it which are true,
Did I my not false error recognize ” (“Purgatorio” xv.).

That is, a mere vision, bodying forth no literal fact, is not false if it symbolizes a truth and so conveys it to the mind. That is the spirit of all high poetry. Now this Apocalypse of John is the poetic book of the New Testament. It contains the poetry of Christian hope. In the interpretation of this book familiarity with the great imaginative literature of the world, especially with the splendid poetry of the Old Testament prophets, with its visions and dreams, its symbols and its types, and the power to sympathize with such emotional and poetical expressions of truth, count for vastly more than mere cold logical precision in the interpretation of language. In such literature it is unwise to look with microscopic care for logical accuracy in thought or chronological sequence of events, and to interpret the poetic, gorgeous drapery of the great conceptions as if meant to indicate the details of history written in advance. The best interpreter of such a book is a great poet, one who can abandon himself to the spell of the emotions stirred by its sublime phraseology. John Milton re-

cognized the Apocalypse as a kind of drama. "The Apocalypse of St. John is the majestic image of a high and stately tragedy, shutting up and intermingling her solemn scenes and acts with a sevenfold chorus of hallelujahs and harping symphonies."

Very suggestive is Tennyson's admiration of this book as indicated in his *Life* (I., 279): "Some parts of the book of Revelation are finer in English than in Greek, *e.g.*, 'And again they said Alleluia, and their smoke went up for ever and ever'—magnificent conception, darkness and fire rolling together for ever and ever."

No one principle of interpretation can be pushed ruthlessly and consistently through all parts and details of the book. We must seek the starting point of our interpretation in the history of the Neronian time, but we must expect no detailed and sustained correspondence. We must recognize concrete references wherever they are obvious; and when they are not, we may wisely let our imagination revel in the poetry of the great pictures of conflict, suffering, and victory, happy to catch the inspiration of faith and hope, and untroubled as to the detailed difficulties of the form.

The *general scheme* of the book is controlled by current Jewish eschatological conceptions, and much of the phraseology is Old Testament or traditional, and much of it poetic. But, in and through and under all, the expectation is that of a really spiritual triumph of the kingdom of God over all its foes. John's is the hopeful, forward look; the tone which vibrates everywhere in the book is that of a faith which endures as seeing the invisible. The Church in her anguish is bidden to look up and behold, in the early future, the coming of her Lord to destroy the

great persecuting empire of Rome, the incarnation not only of human malice but of Satanic enmity. In the signs of the times, John sees so many precursors of the coming of the Lord, milestones on the way to the great consummation, and he depicts grievous judgments upon the world designed to lead men to repentance.

In the *epistles to the seven churches* (chapters ii. and iii.) and in other references throughout the book, we find the concrete historical situation to which the book belongs. It may be that the number seven is the number of perfection, and that the churches named and addressed are taken to represent the universal church. Nevertheless definite historical churches are named and a historical situation is described. On the whole, the churches are faithful and prosperous, earnest and patient in all good work. But there are rebukes for declension, for heresy, or for lukewarmness. The most striking feature in the situation is the prevalence or imminence of persecution, in some cases Jewish, but usually general, and in some passages unmistakably Roman. The later chapters are crimsoned with the martyr blood of the days of Nero, when the brute force of the empire flung itself with crushing weight and yet in vain upon the Christian Church.

In chapter vi., vs. 9-11, we hear the cry of the souls underneath the altar, "the souls of them that had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held: and they cried with a great voice, saying, How long, O Master, the holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth. And there was given them to each one a white robe; and

it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little while, until their fellow-servants also and their brethren, which should be killed, even as they were, should be fulfilled."

In xvii. 6, 9, the woman is unquestionably Rome and she is seen "drunken with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus."

In xviii. 24, we read that "in her (Babylon, *i.e.*, Rome) was found the blood of prophets and of saints and of all that have been slain upon the earth."

In xx. 4, John "saw the souls of them that had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus, and for the word of God." Beheading was the proper Roman mode of execution.

The enemies of the Church are not merely earthly—human forces and human organizations—but Satanic. The conflict is not merely a visible conflict between suffering Christian men and Churches on the one side and the Roman authorities on the other. John carries the conflict up higher and sees it essentially one between God and Christ on the one side and the devil and his agents on the other. In chapter xii, the Church (the woman clothed with the sun) gives birth to the Messiah, the leader of the forces of righteousness. Immediately the old dragon, Satan, the leader of the forces of evil, attempts to destroy Him, and, failing that, to destroy His followers. And so the drama of human history becomes finally a conflict between the Messiah and His Church and the devil and his agents, until eternal victory is achieved for the kingdom of God.

Satan's great earthly agent is indubitably the vast

world empire of Rome. This is the *beast out of the abyss or out of the sea* (xi. 7; xiii. 1, 2). This identification is almost universally recognized by modern scholars. Its genesis we may readily understand. From the time of Pompey, who captured Jerusalem B.C. 63, the Jews had learned to fear and hate Rome. In the Pharisaic Psalms of Solomon (about B.C. 50), Pompey is called "the dragon" (ii. 29). The fourth beast of the book of Daniel the Jews had come to interpret as referring to Rome. Now, at a time when Rome, under Nero, had become violently hostile to Christianity and had brutally tortured and slaughtered multitudes of Christians, we can understand how a Christian prophet should have clothed the Christian horror of Rome and Nero under the vigorous though veiled and enigmatical apocalyptic form supplied by current Jewish thought, and called Rome "the beast," as the incarnation of brutal strength and cruelty.

To this beast Satan delegates his dominion over the world, and the world worships the beast. "And they worshipped the dragon because he gave his authority unto the beast; and they worshipped the beast, saying, Who is like unto the beast? and who is able to war with him?" (xii. 2, 4).

How clearly this describes the actual conditions of those times. Old religions had practically perished or were at least near to vanishing away. All power, civil and sacred, was concentrated in Rome and its emperor. The emperor was deified and worshipped. This worship of the emperor was the test of loyalty. And Christians had to make choice. If they consented to offer incense to the bust of the emperor, they thus proved their imperial loyalty and

lived. If they refused, they died. Loyalty to Christ or loyalty to Rome—such was the alternative ruthlessly forced upon them in times of persecution. Need we wonder, from this point of view, that the apocalypse takes another step and identifies the emperor with the beast as the incarnation of hostility to the kingdom of Christ? If there ever was a case to justify the claim, "*L'état c'est moi*," it was that of the emperor of Rome.

In xvii. 8-11, we read: "The beast that thou sawest was, and is not; and is about to come up out of the abyss, and to go into perdition . . . the seven heads . . . are seven kings; the five are fallen, the one is, the other is not yet come; and when he cometh he must continue a little while. And the beast that was, and is not, is himself also an eighth, and is of the seven; and he goeth unto perdition." The reference is to the idea that Nero, one of the five, should return and be the eighth emperor. And the beast is identified with the eighth emperor.

In xiii. 18, we read: "He that hath understanding, let him count the number of the beast; for it is the number of a man: and his number is 666." Here notice the identification of the beast with an individual man, the empire with the emperor. And notice, also, the identification of that man with Nero. On the well-known Jewish principle of interpretation, called *Gematria*, *i.e.*, the indication of names by numbers, the number 666 is equivalent to the name of Nero in Hebrew.

Let us not think such identification absurd, for just such representations are found elsewhere. In the Sibylline Oracles, Nero is described as the emperor whose sign is 50,

and 50 is represented by N, the initial letter of Nero. We need not wonder that the early Church indulged in such representations of Nero, for he was the head and incarnation of the power and brutality and cruelty of the world-empire, and especially he was the first great persecutor of the Church and would thus ever live in infamous memory.

In addition to the dragon, *i.e.*, Satan, and the first beast, *i.e.*, the empire or the emperor, a *second beast* is brought before us, also designated the "*false prophet*" (xiii.11-18). The description given of this beast, as seducing the world to worship the first beast, identifies this mysterious figure with all those developments of false prophecy, *i.e.*, of intellectual activity prostituted to the service of superstition and idolatry, which helped to establish and maintain the worship of the emperors.

These, then, are the terrible forces arrayed against the Christian Church, small in numbers and in human resources, viz., Satan, the prince of this world, and his human agents in the Roman world of power and thought.

But John turns the gaze of the distressed Church away from the enemies and dangers which hem her in on every side up to the opened heaven, where she may by faith behold a wonderful and reassuring sight, God seated on his throne, surrounded with angels, four living creatures, representatives of creation, and four and twenty elders, representatives of the Church of the Old Testament and the New Testament, deeply interested in the course of human affairs, guiding the developments of human history, and bringing succor and ultimate victory to His own. Before God's throne there gleams a crystal

sea, signifying God's decree regarding the world's history, deep and mysterious to us as the fathomless and unknowable sea, but to God as clear as crystal.

From God in heaven proceed His agents to execute His purposes on earth, and at the last the New Jerusalem descends to men, the distinction between heaven and earth fades out, and the ideal world becomes the real.

In chapter v., we see the book of God's decrees with its seven seals handed over to the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Lamb that was slain—the whole picture indicating the Lord Jesus Christ as the source of the revelation which follows. This representation of our Lord as at once the Lamb slain, and also the Lion of the tribe of Judah and the Word of God, who puts Himself at the head of the conquering hosts of the spiritual Israel, most impressively teaches that Christ's passion and death are the basis of His Messianic work of saving men individually and collectively.

In v. 9, 10, the four living creatures and the four and twenty elders fall before the Lamb and sing a new song, saying, "Worthy art thou to take the book and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and didst purchase unto God with thy blood men of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and madest them to be unto our God a kingdom and priests, and they shall reign upon the earth."

They who share in our Lord's victory over Satan do so by a faith which recognizes His blood as the ground of deliverance from guilt. "And they overcame him (Satan, the accuser of the brethren) because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony" (xii. 11).

The grand panorama which John now unrolls before our astonished eyes represents the risen Lord Jesus Christ as controlling and overruling human affairs, until the time is fulfilled, human history has run its course, and He comes again to overcome all opposition, to judge the world, and to establish His kingdom in its perfect and final form in a new heaven and a new earth.

In briefly considering the *series of events* which the panorama of the book unrolls, we must entirely disabuse our minds of the expectation of strict chronological sequences, an expectation which has confused the interpretation of the book in the highest degree. Need we wonder at the incoherence of these visions more than at those of an ordinary dream? The imagination is here unrestrained, save by the truths and principles of Christian faith. The same symbols have different meanings in different places in the book. For instance, in xiii. 1, the ten horns signify power; in xvii. 12, the ten horns are ten kings; in xvii. 9, 10, the seven heads are both seven mountains and seven kings.

Chronological sequence is ignored and the same event is depicted at different points in the progress of the book. The fall of Babylon is announced in xiv. 8: "And another, a second angel followed, saying, Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, which made all the nations to drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication." Again the history proceeds, and again the fall of Babylon is announced in xviii. 2: "Another angel cried with a mighty voice, saying, Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great and is become a habitation of demons and a hold of every unclean spirit and a hold of every unclean and hateful bird."

In chapter xiv., we see depicted the final victory of the

kingdom, the Son of Man on the throne, the harvest and vintage of the world. Then in chapters xv. and xvi. we have the bowls, a fresh series of judgments which precede the end.

In truth John's interest is more spiritual than historical. He shows us wave after wave of trial, persecution, conflict, victory, judgment sweeping over the world before the end. The book is full of anticipations and retrogressions of thought and representation. The course of history concludes and then begins again.

This is notably true of the representations of the *seals*, *trumpets*, and *bowls*. When the Lion of the tribe of Judah opens the book of the future (chapter v.), the first revelation is not of the coming of the Lord and the deliverance and victory of the Church, but of certain preliminary judgments, precursors of the advent of Christ, designed, at least in part, to lead men to repentance, such judgments as we find predicted in Matt. xxiv.

The details of the representations of the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls are derived either from natural and easy analogies of distress and calamity, or from the scenes of Old Testament history, especially the plagues of Egypt, which almost seem to reappear here in exaggerated forms fitted to awaken feelings of horror and alarm. The attempt to identify these most imaginative representations of distress and judgment with definite historical events has been a huge mistake and a gigantic failure. They are not historical, they are not chronological, they are kaleidoscopic; the same ideas perpetually appear and reappear, only in different combinations, as the hand of the writer gives the literary kaleidoscope another shake and produces another picture.

In the midst of the terrors of these scenes, however, the Church (like Israel amid the plagues of Egypt) is sealed, *i.e.*, is marked out for deliverance and safety (vii. 2-8).

In the mysterious scene in chapter xi. 1, 2 (where the temple of God and the altar and they that worship therein are measured, and the outer court is omitted from the measuring; "for it hath been given unto the nations; and the holy city shall they tread under foot forty and two months"), the measuring seems to indicate preservation (as in Ezekiel xl. and Zech. iv.), the preservation, namely, of the inner shrine of the temple, in the sense that the believing portion of Israel, the Jewish Christian Church, should be saved from destruction amid all the approaching calamities; while the forecourt, *i.e.*, unbelieving Israel, or Israel as a nation, should be abandoned to the rule of the Gentiles. During the indefinite period of disaster which ensues (the three years and a half) God sends *two witnesses* to lead Israel to repentance. They are slain by the Gentiles, but rise from the dead and are exalted in triumph to heaven (xi. 3-12). This mysterious picture may probably be purely symbolical of the fact that God never leaves Himself without a witness and that such witness is never in vain. The Church may bravely and persistently bear its witness to God and His truth, even unto death, in sure and certain hope of ultimate success and triumph. Christianity may be crushed out in its own blood in Rome, in Japan, in China, but it has its resurrection.

"Truth crushed to earth shall rise again,
The eternal years of God are hers;
While error, wounded, writhes in pain,
And dies among his worshippers."

There are a number of connected representations which seem to pertain to the Neronian period and to centre in the person and career of that monster of all vice and infamy and to be colored with the then current expectation of his return to Rome. John represents him as so returning, burning Rome, once more attacking the Church, and finally overcome by the returning Messiah.

We have already seen reason to recognize Nero in the enigmatical number 666 of chapter xiii. 18.

Now, in chapter xiii. 3, after the description of the beast which represents the empire, we read, "And I saw one of his heads as though it had been smitten unto death; and his death-stroke was healed." That seems to mean that the empire has received a deadly wound in the death of its head, Nero. It appeared, amid the chaos of the interregnum which followed Nero's death and the extinction of the Cæsarean dynasty, as if the empire itself were breaking up. But the wound was healed. How? The reference may well be to the popular and long ineradicable notion (which is referred to in Tacitus, Suetonius, Dio Cassius, the Sibylline Oracles, and many Christian writers) that Nero was lying hid in the East and would yet return to his throne. Such is the expectation in xvii. 8-11. "The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sitteth: and they are seven kings; the five are fallen, and the one is, the other is not yet come; and when he cometh he must continue a little while. And the beast that was and is not, is himself also an eighth, and is of the seven: and he goeth into perdition."

In verse 8 the beast is identified with the fifth head and the reference is to the death and expected return of Nero.

So, too, in what follows. Of the seven emperors five have fallen, viz., those of the old Cæsarean line: Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero. Galba, the sixth, now is, when John writes. The seventh, Otho, is not yet come and will not reign long when he comes. Then the eighth emperor will be the returning Nero, identified with the beast once more. That Nero is meant is proved by the statement that he was of the seven. He had been emperor before. He will be emperor again. This expectation seems to extend to the very destruction of Rome itself, for John goes on to describe Nero as returning accompanied by ten kings to Rome, which stands loyal to his rival, capturing it, and destroying it (xvii. 12, 13, 16-18). This representation may be partly due to the actual former burning of Rome under Nero. Need we wonder that the Christian apocalyptist should revel in this prospect of the fall of that great city which had now come to be synonymous to the Christian consciousness with wrong and outrage, idolatry, cruelty, persecution, anticipating for her the fate of ancient Babylon, describing (in chapter xviii.) in his most poetical and powerful language the glory of her might and the ignominy and pathos of her final fall, and exulting in God's just vengeance inflicted on her? "Rejoice over her," cries the voice from heaven (xviii. 20), "thou heaven, and ye saints, and ye apostles, and ye prophets; for God hath judged your judgment on her."

The difficulty that at once suggests itself as an objection to this historical interpretation of this portion of the book is that such a prediction would be so soon discredited by the event. Nero did not return as eighth emperor, destroy Rome, attack Jerusalem, and renew the persecution of the

saints of God. Yet the book continued to be received as apostolic and inspired. This argument would be fatal to *any* form of interpretation which looks to the historical situation for its basis, for, on any such interpretation many of the details remained unfulfilled. As a matter of fact, long after John's time, we find the expectation still persisting among Christians that Nero would yet return, as we learn from the Sibylline Oracles, Irenaeus, Lactantius, Jerome, and Augustine. Moreover, the lack of fulfilment of details of prediction in this book will never discredit the book and its inspiration, so long as it contains great principles of comfort and encouragement which appeal to the Christian heart of all ages and may be applied to all situations of distress and danger. Every anti-Christian appearance has been a return of Nero in spirit and in power.

Chapter xix. represents the Messiah as the Word of God, as the King of kings and Lord of lords, coming forth from the opened heaven prepared for war and inflicting a crushing defeat upon the beast and the kings and their armies. The beast and the false prophet are cast into the lake of fire, and the God-defying empire is thus annihilated. In vain do the heathen rage and the peoples imagine a vain thing against the Lord and His Anointed. The gates of hades shall not prevail against the Church of Christ. Out of all struggle and distress God's kingdom shall emerge victorious.

Now that the beast and false prophet are overthrown and cast into the place of torment, chapter xx. goes on to describe in other forms the triumph of the Church. The dragon is bound and cast into the abyss for *a thousand*

years. Thrones are set and the souls of the martyrs are seen reigning with Christ for a thousand years. This is the first resurrection. After the thousand years Satan is loosed, the conflict is renewed, all enemies are finally destroyed, the great white throne is set, the dead are raised, the judgment proceeds, and eternal destinies are decided.

Here one large and popular school of interpreters see an earthly realization of the Messianic Kingdom, preceded by the second coming of the Lord, the resurrection of believers and their judgment, and followed by a frightful renewal of the old conflict, to be terminated by a third coming of the Lord, the resurrection of the wicked, and the general judgment. Now this whole conception is not only startling, as involving a relapse from Christ's teaching of the spirituality of His Kingdom into the old crass Jewish hope of a local, earthly kingdom, but is involved in such difficulties in detail that its very advocates fall into innumerable complex and divergent elaborations. It will be better, in my brief paper, to simply insist that this literal interpretation throws the passage into violent collision with many other passages throughout the New Testament, in every one of which the second coming of Christ is directly connected with the general resurrection, the general judgment, and the consummation of the kingdom, and that not in an earthly but in a heavenly sphere. The premillennialists have committed the grave exegetical error of allowing one solitary passage, and that found in the one New Testament book of visions and symbols, confessedly perplexing to the interpreter, to control their whole thought of the last things, and to entirely and most unwarrantably distort their interpretation of the numerous

other and easier and clearer New Testament passages. Surely the true rule of exegesis is, if possible, to understand the one passage in the light of the many, the symbolical in the light of the literal, the obscure in the light of the clear, and not *vice versa*.

It appears to me that both premillennialists and post-millennialists have erred at this point, the former for the reason which I have just named, and the latter because the New Testament expectation of the second coming of the Lord knows nothing of the lapse of any such period of a thousand years before that eagerly desired event. It appears to me that this whole millennial representation has been magnified in current thought out of all reasonable proportions. It appears to me that there are no insuperable objections to an ideal or spiritual interpretation of this passage, such as shall bring it into harmony with the rest of the New Testament.

This whole book is a book of glowing images and glorious visions, through the whole of which one vital and victorious truth shines forth for the inspiration and encouragement of the persecuted Church, viz., that all hostility to God's kingdom must ever be in vain, that out of all struggles and distresses God's people shall emerge triumphant. In such a work of the imagination as this book is, chronological sequences are not important and numbers are rather symbolical than literal. Satan was bound when Christ, by His death and resurrection, broke the power of Satan in principle. The first resurrection is not literal, but ideal, and is but a bold poetical representation of the victory and felicity of the Christian martyrs under Nero. It is "souls" not bodies that John beholds. The resur-

rection, in the proper sense, comes later in the chapter, where John sees "the dead both great and small standing before the throne" for judgment, after the sea has given up the dead in it, and death and hades have given up the dead in them. There will not be *two* resurrections of the same persons; and the language of the latter part of the chapter labors to express the absolute universality of the resurrection which it describes. Therefore I conclude that the first resurrection, the resurrection of the souls of the martyrs in the earlier part of the chapter, is purely spiritual or ideal, and that the thought is simply and grandly this, that the dead are not dead, the martyrs slaughtered by cruel Roman hands yet live, live in the highest sense, live in joy and felicity and triumph, live with Christ, and gloriously share with Him the victory which is ideally, *i.e.*, in the purposes of God and in the sure and certain hope of the Christian, already present and complete.

Dionysius of Alexandria describes certain martyrs under Decius, and then says of them that "they are *now* sitting with Christ, sharers in His kingdom, partners in His judgment, *now* judging with Him" (Euseb. H. E., vi. 42).

The thousand years' reign is not said to be on earth, and is by no means to be understood grossly, materially, literally. It is a plastic, poetic, symbolic representation of the completeness of the triumph of Christ and His Church. John uses, as we have seen, throughout the book, all available literary forms and devices suggested by the Old Testament, and by current apocalyptic representations to express with all possible force his splendid faith in "the one divine far off event, to which the whole creation moves."

In this particular passage he uses a familiar Jewish form of thought, that of a thousand years' reign of the Messiah in Palestine, in order to paint in the richest colors an ideal picture of the blessedness of God's people in the complete triumph of Christ and His Church over all opposing forces. A thousand is simply the symbol of completeness.

The loosing of Satan after the thousand years may signify the fact that while ideally, the triumph is already complete, yet, actually, Satan and all the forces of evil are still active and the struggle goes on, until the Lord comes at the end of the world's troubled history. How else, under the visionary form of representation, could such a qualification of the ideal representation of triumph be introduced and made vivid? I repeat that notes of sequences of time count for little in dreams or visions. One kaleidoscopic picture here represents Satan as bound ; the next turn of the kaleidoscope shows him at liberty and at work ; there is no chronological sequence ; the two representations are synchronous. John is not, then, giving us here a forecast of an actual period of history lasting for a thousand years.

With this interpretation we escape from the interminable disputes of premillennialists and postmillennialists, harmonize the New Testament with itself, and see the whole early Church looking hopefully forward to the speedy coming of the Lord. Their error as to the *time* does not discredit the substance of their hope, for times and seasons are the very point on which we might expect rashness, and in regard to which their Lord Himself warned them of precipitate judgment. The faith and hope

of the Church will always be stimulated by these apocalyptic representations of the triumph of the martyrs, the doom of the oppressors, the great white throne and its judgment, the glorious final realization of all ancient hopes and promises and ideals in the New Jerusalem, the gorgeous pictures of which complete John's magnificent panorama of history and salvation.

This gracious and glorious consummation is here, as everywhere else in the New Testament, not earthly but *heavenly*, and consists here, as everywhere else in the New Testament, essentially in a blessed state of fellowship with God. The old scene of man's history has disappeared, a new heaven and a new earth have taken the place of the old, the principle of death, as well as that of evil, has been cast out of this new sphere and scene of man's activity, change and decay have been abolished, the "new" world is a world of a new quality (such is the form of the Greek *καινὸν*), it is the ideal world realized in the perfectly blessed experience of a redeemed people of God.

The *New Jerusalem* comes down out of heaven from God, that is, this final and perfect form of God's kingdom is ideally present with God before it is realized among men, and now, at the long last of human history, human hopes and struggles, aspirations and efforts find their fruition in the realization of the divine and eternal ideal of a perfect relation and fellowship between God and His people. A well-ordered city is the perfection of human social relations, and therefore here represents the perfect state of the kingdom of God, in which perfect obedience and perfect fellowship and perfect felicity forevermore abide.

"These are they which come out of the great tribulation,

and they washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God ; and they serve him day and night in his temple, and he that sitteth on his throne shall spread his tabernacle over them. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more ; neither shall the sun strike upon them, nor any heat : for the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall be their shepherd, and shall guide them unto fountains of waters of life ; and God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes " (vii. 15-17).

"And there shall be no curse any more: and the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be therein : and his servants shall do him service ; and they shall see his face ; and his name shall be on their foreheads. And there shall be night no more ; and they need no light of lamp, neither light of sun ; for the Lord God shall give them light : and they shall reign for ever and ever " (xxii. 3-5).

So ends the thought of this wonderful book of Revelation, after so many frightful and perplexing pictures of sin and judgment, of battle and victory, in these sublime, unequalled descriptions of everlasting and unalloyed felicity in the perfected fellowship of the redeemed with God.

" Jerusalem the golden,
 With milk and honey blest ;
 Beneath thy contemplation
 Sink heart and voice oppressed.
 I know not, O I know not
 What social joys are there !
 What radiancy of glory,
 What light beyond compare ! "

Interpreted literally and mechanically, this book may lead, has often led, to bitterness and wrath, to fanaticism and excess.

Interpreted reasonably, in the light of the facts and principles of such literature elsewhere, it is the sublimest and most inspiring poetry, the poetry of comfort and consolation, of courage and of hope. We should read it not so much to identify details as to come under the spell of the grand spiritual truths and principles which underlie all the details, and so to catch the noble enthusiasm of its sublime faith in God and His kingdom. So reading it, we shall find it one of the most fascinating and most helpful books of the whole New Testament, enlisting our imagination in the service of our faith.

